African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 10
Issue 4 *December 2007*

Article 26

12-1-2007

Quilombo Country

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Film Review

Quilombo Country **(2006). Directed, produced, and photographed by Leonard Abrams; Assistant Director, Shirli Michalevicz; Assistant Producer, Eduarda Ribeiro; Narrator, Chuck D. Quilombo Films, New York. 73-minute length. Available through www.quilombocountry.com.**

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Chris Espenshade, New South Associates

Please allow me a few disclaimers before getting into the body of the review. First, I am not really a film reviewer. Accordingly, I will not be offering any in-depth comments on the cinema-graphic strengths of this film (but please note that it has played to strong reviews at many international festivals). Secondly, I am an archaeologist, and I do not pretend to be fully versed in the historical and cultural anthropological study of the Diaspora and the diverse New World cultures created by the Diaspora. Accordingly, I reviewed this film: (a) to inform the readers of this *Newsletter* about the content of the documentary; and (b) to evaluate how interesting the film might be to archaeologists of the Diaspora.

One more, short note must be made before getting into the heart of the review. The documentary contains people speaking Portuguese (as to be expected in Brazil), but provides English-language subtitles. As well, the revised version of the DVD (as provided for review) includes an English-language narrative by Chuck D. The director makes only limited use of the narration, preferring to let the images and the people speak for themselves. In this instance, the approach works well.

Children on their way to school in Varre Vento, Trombetas, Brazil. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Abrams.

I strongly recommend that African Diaspora archaeologists make the effort to see this film. It is a visually stunning investigation into quilombos of Brazil. The film presents a fast-moving, yet detailed, examination of today's quilombos, of their history, and of their ties to African culture. Quilombos (an Angolan word for "encampments") refers to communities that were established by Brazilian Maroons (runaway slaves), often with assistance from local Indians. We learn that there are more than 2,000 such communities in Brazil today, and that their residents face significant struggles to maintain their cultural identity.

The film begins with a short overview of the history of quilombos, and then visits the residents of quilombos in three main regions of northern Brazil: Itapicuru, Marajo, and Trombetas. Some of the still graphics in the background portion of the film are too basic, and detract from the overall quality of the documentary. As Abrams traveled through these areas, he allowed the people to speak about their history, the importance of their identity, and their struggles in modern times.

Abrams provides a sampler of local life ways and traditions. He is to be applauded for not seeing solely African roots in all the quilombo traditions, but rather celebrating the syncretism of diasporic African, native Indian, and Brazilian Portuguese. For example, the

quilombo process for preparing manioc is identical to that described by Columbus for the Taino Indians and to that recorded ethnographically among many Amazonian tribes.

To archaeologists of the African Diaspora, the film offers brief flashes of what we consider classic, African-derived traits. We see people who still construct and live in wattle and daub houses. We see hand-made nets and rice-winnowing baskets that mirror those to be purchased in Gullah markets of the South Carolina coast. We see drumming, singing, and dancing that match historical descriptions of slave communities of African Americans and African Caribbeans.

The belief systems are the clearest and most visible examples of syncretism. Despite the best efforts of the Catholic Church to eliminate African-derived beliefs, the local religions (e.g., Macumba) are a complex mixture of Portuguese Catholicism, African-derived traditions, and possibly indigenous influences. Quilombo religions are closely tied to the local landscape, to the available folk medicines, and to spirits of the forest. The film samples many festivals and ceremonies, and all are creole. Indeed, we are told that more than one-third of all Brazilians have African-derived traits in their religious practices.

Pancada Falls on the Erepecuru, an Amazon tributary in the Trombetas region of Brazil. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Abrams.

An example of this religious creolism, a possible cosmogram is illustrated from the Marajo area, and it is said to be used "to call healers from the depths." The symbol has a cruciform in its center, surrounded by a Star of David, in turn surrounded by arrows projecting outwards from each point of the star. In this same area, despite the presence of much metal-ware, glass, and plastic, small clay pots are still used in certain religious practices.

Possible cosmogram inscription in chalk on the inside walls of a house in the Marajo Island area. Photograph courtesy of Leonard Abrams.

The film also addresses the concepts of self-identity, the uses of heritage, and the fight to maintain communities. Despite enhanced legal standing, the quilombos all face issues of land control, access to education, blatant and subtle racism, and economic exploitation. There is a wonderful piece of footage of a quilombo woman departing a peaceful stream with water pot balanced on her head, only to be forced off the trail by a bulldozer. The re-emergence of the quilombo identity is seen as key to fighting the modern battles. Abrams does an excellent job of presenting the challenges of the quilombos without being either preachy or paternalistic.

The writing and the unobtrusive narrative style serve well the telling of this story. Chuck D and the writer do not emote or oversell the obvious tragedies of quilombo history, nor do they fall into the trap of presenting these African Brazilians as "noble savages."

The viewer should not expect a perfectly smooth movie. This film was shot in digital video, and was edited to provide a feel for the places and people. The images are striking, but not always perfectly lit or steadily shot. At first, the unsteadiness of some of the camera work seems a bit distracting, but by the end of the film I recognized how well it fit with the music, people, and images captured.

There will be instances in this film where you wish you had been told more (those of us spoiled by commercial, Hollywood DVDs will be looking for the Director's Cut and DVD Extras). For example, the Colonoware researchers in the crowd might like more detail on the traditional uses of clay pots at Pajé. However, the viewer must keep in mind that a 73-minute documentary covering more than 200 years and thousands of square miles cannot provide the same level of detail as an academic study of a single community. I learned a lot watching this film, and it made me want to learn more. As an informative overview, *Quilombo Country* succeeds.

I feel that this film will appeal to the readers of the ADAN. The documentary would also serve well as a teaching tool in undergraduate courses on the Diaspora. It can serve well as a platform or starting point for classroom discussions on a number of key topics including racial identity, cultural syncretism, resistance to slavery, and the role of heritage in the modern world. It is a well-made, interesting, and enlightening story. I hope you enjoy *Quilombo Country* as much as I did.